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ABSTRACT

LSP is an acronym for "Language for Special Purposes." Two distance learning English-for-Special-Purposes (ESP) pilot projects at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) are described to illustrate the type of work to which distance learning might make a contribution. English is the language of instruction at AIT. The first project is a pre-session academic orientation course for postgraduate engineers at AIT. Students are provided with recorded lectures to familiarize them with their professors' speech, transcripts of lectures and note-taking exercises, a selection of recommended readings, sample assignments and of corrected papers, and sample exams. This process also helps professors to become familiar with the students before they arrive at AIT. The second project is a language teaching and teacher training program for English-as-a-Foreign-Language and ESP teachers in Hanoi, where teachers of English are in high demand. The political and economic reforms in Vietnam have resulted in a rapidly-growing amount of investment in the country, but teachers rely heavily on currently-available textbooks and do not have time or resources to use newer materials or methods. An in-service economics course was designed with Birmingham University to provide teachers with videocassettes containing a selection of news programs and documentaries, accompanied by transcripts and exercises. Contains 51 references. (LB)

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Distance Learning: A Neglected Mode of Instruction in LSP*

*LSP = Language for Special Purposes

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Introduction

Distance learning is a mode of instruction that has evolved from study by correspondence and it is one that can be of particular value to adults with a high level of motivation who may prefer to study at a time that is convenient to them, at a pace that suits them, and in a place and manner of their own choosing. For the adult learner, the opportunity cost of distance learning (DL) is a major attraction of this mode of instruction and it may account for the striking number of universities in Britain that now offer distance learning MBAs. The cost of attending a full-time course is not only very high, but the student who attends one suffers the loss of his or her income and it may take many years to recoup these costs. There has been a similar, though less striking, growth in the number of institutions providing EFL/ESL qualifications by DL.

Related to the cost advantage of distance learning for the student is the fact that he or she is not separated from the environment in which he or she works. In the context of LSP, this means that the learner can apply and evaluate what is being taught in an appropriate situation. The usual delay in applying new ideas or

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methods does not occur and neither does the problem of readjusting to teaching after a lengthy absence or after prolonged contact with a different culture. The distance learner remains a member of an educational organization and can share and discuss the course content with colleagues and friends. The DL student may therefore be less of an 'isolated' learner than the non-native speaker who spends a year in Britain or the United States. For those bodies which provide funds for students to undertake such courses, distance learning has the advantage of being a 'public' medium of instruction and the teaching materials are available for inspection and evaluation.

The distance that is important is 'transactional' distance (Davis 1988), rather than geographical distance.

> **Transactional distance has two components: "dialogue", how much the learner and the teacher can respond to each other in a given educational context; and "structure", how much the educational program responds to individual learner needs (Davis 1988:548).**

As technology develops and becomes increasingly used in academic environments, not only does more intimate contact become possible between teacher and student in the DL mode, but also the need for face-to-face contact in the traditional context becomes less important. Mugridge and Kaufman (1986) argue that the lines that

once existed between DL and conventional education are, in fact, becoming increasingly blurred. Students on a DL course can communicate with their teachers by letter, telephone, facsimile, audio-cassette, e-mail, and so forth, and they may receive very considerable personal attention by so doing. Unless distances are truly considerable, meetings between student and teacher or adviser are an almost inevitable step. For students of the UK Open University and many other distance learning institutions, periodic meetings are mandatory. Hence, as Keegan (1990:33) and many others point out, most distance learners worldwide are in metropolitan areas and have chosen distance learning for the freedom it allows them.

Keegan (1990:38) suggests that DL can be defined by the following characteristics:

* the separation of the teacher and the learner, which distinguishes distance learning from face-to-face teaching;

* the influence of an educational organization, which distinguishes it from private study;

* the use of technical media, usually print, which unites the teacher and the learner and carries the educational content;

* the provision of two-way communication, which means that the

student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue;

* the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes.

DL differs from correspondence education not only in the greater variety of media employed, but also in the greater understanding of the difficulties the isolated distance learner faces and in the efforts that are made to provide support for learners (Sewart 1982).

Although distance learning came into formal existence in the nineteenth century with the establishment of the postal services, it is only in the past thirty years that it has become very widely known. One of the first important distance learning institutions in Asia was the Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan, which was founded in 1972. The establishment of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand followed in 1978, and that of the Central Radio and Television University in China in 1979, the Open University of Sri Lanka in 1980, the Correspondence University of the Republic of Korea and the Andhra Pradesh Open University in 1982, and the Universitas Terbuka in Indonesia in 1984. Most countries in Asia now have such universities and India, in fact, has six. There are also smaller and more specialized bodies, such as the Open Learning Institute in Hong Kong and the East Asia Open Institute in Macau.

In the developed countries, distance learning was established to cater to the educational needs at the post-secondary or higher-education level of adults who could not or did not wish to be served by the conventional education systems (Mugridge and Kaufman 1986). In Asia, on the other hand, the need was to provide university education for very large numbers of young people for whom there were no places at the formal universities (Setijadi 1988). By 1990, the Universitas Terbuka had 150,000 students (Idris 1990), Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University had 200,000 (Pakdiratn 1990), and it was estimated that the Central Radio and Television University in China, with its provincial affiliates, would have about 700,000 students (Zhao 1988).

Distance learning has made a significant impact not just in higher education generally, but in very many fields. In the teaching of languages other than English, there is a great deal of work being done in the DL mode, particularly in Canada and the United States. Karpiak (1985:20) states that forty-four distance teaching institutions in the United States teach nearly six hundred university-level courses in the study of at least twenty-five languages, while in Canada twelve universities offer eighty courses in eleven languages. Since Karpiak's survey, distance education has grown in importance (St. Pierre 1990) and it is likely that there are now very many more courses being taught. However, little of the work that has been done or is being done is described in the literature (Karpiak 1985:19).

In the teaching of LSP, on the other hand, it is reasonable to think that there is not such a lot of work to describe. There are few references to language teaching by means of DL in any of the better known EFL, ESP or Applied Linguistics journals, and a recent British Council publication which was devoted to this mode of instruction contained only one passing reference to language teaching (D. Clarke 1991). There are three isolated articles by Davies (1977a; 1977b; 1978), and more recent descriptions of relatively small-scale projects in Canada (Karpiak 1985; Selman 1984, 1988) and Australia (Harris 1991; Kozlowski 1986; Watts 1988). The Australian articles describe the Adult Migrant Education Program's pioneering work in ESL by distance learning. One of the few articles of direct relevance to LSP is Perrin (1992), which is an account of an imaginative DL listening comprehension project in Bordeaux which makes use of videos and faxes.

In a recent survey article, Lambert (1991) suggests that DL 'operates in a sort of educational ghetto in foreign language instruction' and that this is partly because teachers see it as a possible threat to their careers, and partly because they are healthily sceptical about new technological teaching devices. Although the DL literature does contain intimidating references to 'Telematic services for Tutoring and Monitoring' and 'DELTA COM-NET for Communications' (Whiting and Bell 1987), and despite the fact that the literature of the **United States Distance Learning Association** is heavily biased towards the latest developments in

technology, most DL programmes worldwide rely overwhelmingly on printed materials, supplemented by audio-cassettes and, to a much lesser extent, by video-cassettes (Keegan 1983). Hence, while these two factors may contribute to 'the ghetto status' of this mode of instruction, a more probable cause is simply that most language teachers know little about it. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to describe two distance learning ESP pilot projects at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) and to illustrate the type of work to which DL might make a contribution. The first project is a pre-sessional academic orientation course by DL for post-graduate engineers at the Asian Institute of Technology, and the second is a language teaching and teacher training programme for EFL/ESP teachers in Hanoi.

The Pre-sessional academic orientation programme

The background

AIT is an internationally-funded, post-graduate institution where the medium of instruction is English. Almost all of the students are Asian and about half come from what Kachru (1992) calls the "Outer Circle" of English users and the others come from the "Expanding Circle". Not only are the students drawn almost equally from these two circles, but so are ninety percent of the professors, with the remaining ten percent coming from the "Inner

Circle". Very many of the students from the countries of the "Expanding Circle" have difficulty in understanding lectures delivered in English and this task is made more difficult by the range of idiolects to which they are exposed. In one day, they might hear lectures delivered by an Australian, a Sri Lankan, a Chinese, and a Japanese. In time, they become familiar with very many accents, but the process of adjustment needs to be rapid, because they face mid-term examinations after just six weeks. Although only about one student in a hundred and fifty actually fails, too many never realize their potential.

There is a pre-sessional language course at AIT, but it can only cater for roughly ten percent of any intake. There are also first term language courses, but the students most in need of help usually do not attend. As Swales (1985:137-138) has pointed out

> **MA and MSc students have less time than other groups to take advantage of the language and language-related services offered to them; further, and even more paradoxically, those Master's students with the least proficiency (and so in greater need of help) have least time available because their departmental work is taking them so much longer.**

As pre-sessional preparation on campus is not possible for most students, an attempt is being made to help them by means of distance learning in the three months before they begin their

courses. This work involves sending the students the following material:

* lectures recorded by the professors who will teach first-term courses;

* transcripts of the lectures; note-taking exercises; vocabulary and other exercises; and an answer key;

* a selection of readings recommended by the professors;

* examples of first-term assignments and of corrected papers with the professors' comments;

* examples of mid-term and end-of-term exam papers.

The Content

The work is aimed at students in the Institute's Water Resources Engineering Division, which has an annual intake of about twenty-five students. Although reading is probably the most important skill in EAP, this work concentrates on lecture comprehension, for two reasons. Firstly, students most often ask for help with this aspect of their work, because it is where they are, initially, most conscious of failing. Secondly, not all students take the same

classes and only eight or ten may attend lectures in one subject or another. In such a small group, there is no hiding place for those who cannot understand the language used by the professor.

The aims of the work are fourfold. Most obviously, it gives the students the opportunity to become familiar with the idiolectal characteristics of their professors' speech and to preview the course, as Lynch (1986:13) recommends. Secondly, it aims to teach them certain formal schemata to complement the content schemata they already have (Carrell 1987). Considerable practice is given in predicting the content of the discourse and the development of it, and the work of Tadros (1985) has proved to be very valuable in this respect. All of the categories she identified, with perhaps the exception of 'Reporting', have proved important and some engineers, as model builders, seem to use 'Hypotheticality' nearly as much as economists do. Thirdly, students are encouraged to aim for a 'reasonable interpretation' of what they hear (Brown 1977) and not to account themselves failures if they do not understand eighty percent or more of what is said. Finally, an important purpose of this work is to try to get to know the students before they arrive at the Institute so that it will be easier to help them once they are here. Attempts in the past at negotiating the first term syllabus with the students (D.F. Clarke 1991) have not been successful, and neither have attempts to discover what particular work students might need for "success" in their course work (Selinker 1988:35). However, this DL project seems to offer a

partial solution to both of these problems.

The Procedure

The Registry provides students' names and addresses about ten to twelve weeks before a course begins and the cassettes and printed matter are then sent to the students. In the manner of the Australian Migrant program, 'send back' exercises are included in the package of material, as are blank cassettes. The students use these cassettes to talk about themselves, their work, their concerns about language, to comment on the material they have received, and to provide the answers to some of the exercises. As Kaikumba and Cryer (1987) point out, this is a lot easier than writing things down and it can be a lot more revealing. The aim is to encourage as much communication as possible.

Students are urged to communicate not only with the language teacher who sends them the material, but also with any fellow countrymen or women who have been offered a place at AIT. Most Nepalese students, for example, come from Kathmandhu and most Vietnamese from either Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. In China or Indonesia there is, of course, far less likelihood of students being close enough to communicate, but even they have the opportunity of obtaining information or advice locally about the courses they will attend, because AIT alumni are spread throughout Asia. Those former students contacted for the purposes of this

project have in almost all cases expressed a willingness to give this help. In fact, as students are drawn regularly from certain universities and government departments, the student may even find an alumnus in the building in which he or she works.

Evaluation

The effectiveness of the DL materials is shown by the extent to which the students are able, once they arrive at AIT, to extract and record the appropriate information from the lectures they attend. Evaluation begins at a very early stage, because students may send cassettes containing their thoughts about the work to the language teacher, or they may deliver them at the start of the first term. Questionnaires elicit further information and opinions, and there is discussion of the problems and shortcomings of the project during the term. In addition, the professors' views of the students' comprehension are sought, and the grades that students are awarded for mid-term and end-of-term examinations are of particular interest, as these are what the project is intended to influence.

The DL language teaching and teacher training pilot project in Hanoi

The Background

The political and economic reforms in Vietnam have resulted in a rapidly-growing amount of foreign investment in the country. Much of the communication between the Vietnamese and their foreign partners takes place in English and, as a consequence, teachers of English are in considerable demand. Many who teach in universities and tertiary-level colleges work extremely long hours and it is not uncommon for such people to have forty lessons a week. This is partly because of institutional pressure on them to help satisfy the demand for language lessons, and partly because they and their families have the opportunity to increase their income significantly.

With very little time available for lesson preparation, the teachers rely heavily on textbooks. However, because the country has not had the foreign exchange needed for the import of books, audio-cassettes, journals, and teaching aids, and because relatively little indigenous material has been produced, teachers are obliged to use the same sets of books and materials repeatedly. Hence, they suffer fatigue because of the long hours and they lack support and stimulation.

In the field of LSP, Vietnamese teachers are generally unaware of progress that has been made in the last decade in theory and methodology, again because journals and books are unavailable to most people. Recently, a group of Vietnamese teachers of English was recruited to teach a class of economists who needed to raise their reading ability in economics from about Band 4 on the IELTS scale to at least Band 6, and the teachers were given ninety hours to do the job. In view of this restriction, it was suggested that, in addition to general reading skills, teachers should try to make use of the important research that has already been done into the language of economics. Much of the work published by Bramki and Williams (1984), Dudley-Evans and Henderson (1990), Henderson (1982), Henderson and Hewings (1987a), Hoey (1983), Mead and Henderson (1983), and Tadros (1985), is readily applicable to the classroom. Although this suggestion evoked a very interested response from the Vietnamese teachers, they had insufficient time or energy to read articles or books. They could teach from books with which they were familiar, or which required little preparation, but they did not have time to undertake the sort of work that was being asked of them.

It was suggested that an in-service course be arranged in order to illustrate the ideas of the Birmingham University researchers, but the teachers relied heavily on the income from their numerous language classes and therefore the opportunity cost of attending a short course was too great. The solution arrived at, therefore, was

one that aimed at easing the teachers' burden and improving their work by providing them with new and interesting teaching materials, for which little preparation would be required, and which aimed at leading them from successful practice to an understanding of the principles underlying the work.

The Content

The Vietnamese counterparts work in universities as English teachers and teacher trainers and they have students within Bands 4 to 6 or more on the IELTS scale. They wanted material that would be applicable to a wide range of students, that was 'authentic', and that was varied and interesting. It was decided that off-air video-cassette recordings would satisfy these requirements, as all of the teachers in the pilot project have access at work to a video-cassette recorder. Hence, the teachers are sent a video-cassette containing a selection of news programmes and documentaries, a transcript of the programmes, and a variety of exercises from which they can select what suits their interests and style of teaching.

In order to enhance comprehension of the material and to improve recall of it, it is important to activate the students' content and formal schemata prior to reading or viewing, and to encourage them to make predictions at all stages of the work (Kozma 1991; Tudor and Tuffs 1991; Wagemans, Valcke and Dochy 1991). Many of the

exercises, therefore, were designed to develop these habits and to familiarize both teachers and students with the structure of different genres. Some of the short documentaries, for example, have very clear, if complex, Problem - Solution patterns, and the turn-taking and topic-shifting patterns that Greatbatch (1986, 1988)identified in radio interviews seem equally applicable to television. Another important strand of this work is vocabulary development and, in particular, the development of the students ability to infer meaning from the co-text. The language teacher has the benefit of valuable work by Carter and McCarthy (1988), Henderson and Hewings (1987b), Kelly (1991), Li (1988), and Nation (1990), among others.

The study of general texts, therefore, is a preliminary to the study of the specialized economics texts, since there is much common ground. The work will be a co-operative venture with the Vietnamese teachers not only modifying the input in the light of their own teaching experience and their knowledge of the students and the circumstances, but also suggesting ways in which certain goals can be reached. However, without the breathing space and time for reflection provided by the video-recordings, transcripts, and exercises, it will be difficult for them to make the contribution of which they are capable.

Conclusion

Distance learning is a mode of instruction that has yet to make an impression on the teaching of LSP. However, in view of the ever-growing demand for LSP in more and more fields, the advantages that distance learning offers in terms of the cost, convenience, and relevance to the student, coupled with the increasingly rapid development of the means of communication, suggest that it merits the serious attention of teachers in this field.

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